

COVID-19 Pandemic Is Hitting Gen Z Hard. Find Ways to Connect

By Kathy Gurchiek

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Employees are feeling the impact of working remotely during the pandemic. Many have been asked to social distance for months now, and those ages 18 to 24 have been especially hard-hit, according to a new national study by The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK), a global research firm in Austin, Texas.

[*SHRM members-only toolkit: Developing Employee Career Paths and Ladders* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/developingemployeecareerpathsandladders.aspx)]

Generation Z employees are finding remote work more challenging overall (https://genhq.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Executive-Summary-Leading-Multiple-Generations-Remotely_Final.pdf)—more than one-third said it has hurt their work/life balance and think their employer needs to provide them with better tools for working remotely.

Millennials and Generation X, though, report the most positive overall experience with this workplace change, according to CGK's online survey conducted with 1,000 U.S. respondents ages 18 to 90. Fifty percent of Millennials—the oldest of whom are 39 this year—said they feel they are more productive working remotely. Among Generation X—the oldest of whom are 55 this year—41 percent prefer to continue working from home after the pandemic and think it fosters better communication and trust in co-workers and managers.

Members of Generation Z said it's most important that their managers are well-informed, while Baby Boomers and members of Generation X said being candid is what they most want in a manager right now.

More than two-thirds of total respondents to CGK's survey were Millennials (39 percent) and Baby Boomers (30 percent). The sample was weighted to the current U.S. Census data for age, region, gender and ethnicity and had a margin of error of +/-3.1 percent.

"The study reveals that the experience of remote work is uneven and rife with anxiety," said Jason Dorsey, CGK president, in a news release. "More importantly, the study showed what leaders need to know and do now."

Each generation is experiencing the pandemic differently, said Denise Villa, CEO of CGK and co-author with Dorsey of *Zconomy: How Gen Z Will Change the Future of Business—and What to Do About It* (Harper Business, 2020).

"This is important to understand, as organizations must remotely lead four or five generations simultaneously. Gen Z's emergence could herald in a new era of hybrid work that is normal to them and for the youngest members of Gen Z, all they've ever known," she said in a news release about CGK's survey findings.

SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx)

A Defining Moment

The Society for Human Resource Management ([https://shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/SHRM%20CV19%20Mental%20Health%20Research%20Presentation%20v1.pdf?_ga=2.239718275.1849099250.1597584197-](https://shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/SHRM%20CV19%20Mental%20Health%20Research%20Presentation%20v1.pdf?_ga=2.239718275.1849099250.1597584197-1021787754.1579020315&_gac=1.219277163.1594299459.CjwKCAjw88v3BRBFEiwApwLevXYTYu_3T6_8GDFaSuwY-GC23K0nPFW6aSJmGImQ5XHq0MbyLRq3SRoCOUQQAvD_BwE)

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[GC23K0nPFW6aSJmGImQ5XHq0MbyLRq3SRoCOUQQAvD_BwE](https://shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/SHRM%20CV19%20Mental%20Health%20Research%20Presentation%20v1.pdf?_ga=2.239718275.1849099250.1597584197-1021787754.1579020315&_gac=1.219277163.1594299459.CjwKCAjw88v3BRBFEiwApwLevXYTYu_3T6_8GDFaSuwY-GC23K0nPFW6aSJmGImQ5XHq0MbyLRq3SRoCOUQQAvD_BwE)) (SHRM) found that half of employees from Generation Z felt burned out

from work versus one-fourth of Baby Boomers who felt this way. The findings are based on a survey sample of 1,099 U.S. employees conducted April 15 through April 16.

"The younger the employee, the more likely they were to report feeling emotionally drained from work," SHRM said in its report.

Generation Z is particularly affected by the pandemic because—like the Great Depression and World War II were for Traditionalists and Sept. 11, 2001, was for Millennials (<https://genhq.com/moments-shape-generation/>)—the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Recession of 2007-09 have been major impacts on the formative years of this generation, said Jessica Stollings-Holder, president of ReGenerations. ReGenerations is a company specializing in studying generational trends and using that information to help organizations be more effective in recruiting, engaging and retaining their employees.

Rites of passage such as graduation and marriage are delayed or reconfigured, and this generation is worried about falling behind in their schooling (50 percent), their job prospects (67 percent) and financial stability (80 percent). Forty-one percent think they will be worse off when the pandemic ends, according to a ReGenerations survey of more than 500 people from 29 states and six countries.

"[COVID-19] is their moment, the defining moment," Stollings-Holder said. "When you're in your formative years and these things happen they inform your outlook and expectations. That's why this is hard for Gen Z: They've seen a lot in a short amount of time (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/2016-talent-management-conference-jeff-hiller-gen-z-globals.aspx), so this becomes a really intense moment for them."

Employers can address Generation Z's concerns by providing financial stability and mental wellness tips and by encouraging healthy behaviors such as sleep, exercise and meditation, she said.

These digital natives also do not like working from home, according to ReGeneration's report, *We Want Connection ... And We Don't Mean Wi-Fi* (<https://re-generations.org/gen-z-covid-19-study/>). On average, they are willing to work from home about 33 percent of the workweek—the equivalent of 1.5 days.

They prefer in-person communication and collaboration (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/digital-natives-value-collaboration.aspx). Only 11 percent think Zoom and other online meeting platforms are as effective as in-person meetings. And 85 percent prefer learning opportunities to be in-person—something employers need to keep in mind when designing training. They also miss their friends and feel lonely and anxious.

"They're feeling incredibly isolated, so give them something that has some structure. We need to reconnect them," Stollings-Holder said.

That includes asking leaders to share stories about their career journey and encouraging Generation Z employees to talk about what this

experience has been like for them. And while in-person mentoring may not be feasible currently, look for other ways to stay in touch, such as phone calls.

Make town hall meetings interactive and ask for ideas on how to bring an in-person feel to company gatherings. Some organizations are getting creative with their meetings during the pandemic (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/pages/company-talk-show-virtual-clubs-keep-employees-connected-during-covid19-pandemic.aspx).

"They want to connect," Stollings-Holder said, "so simulate that interpersonal connection with everything you do."

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